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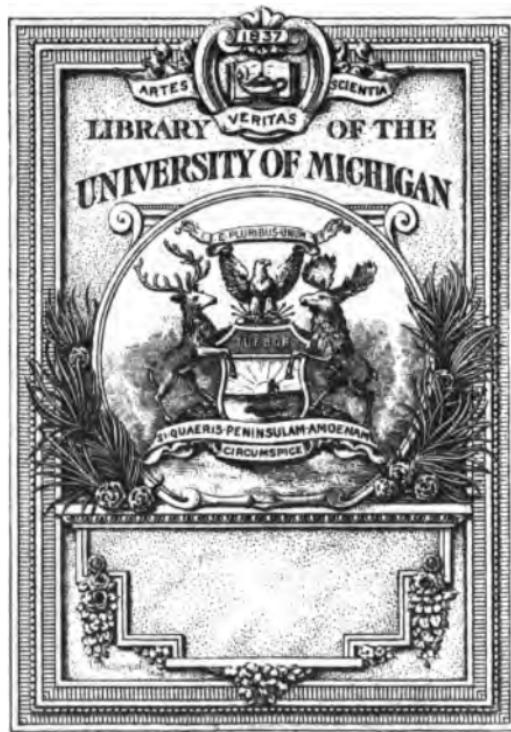
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A Talk About Books
J. N. Larned



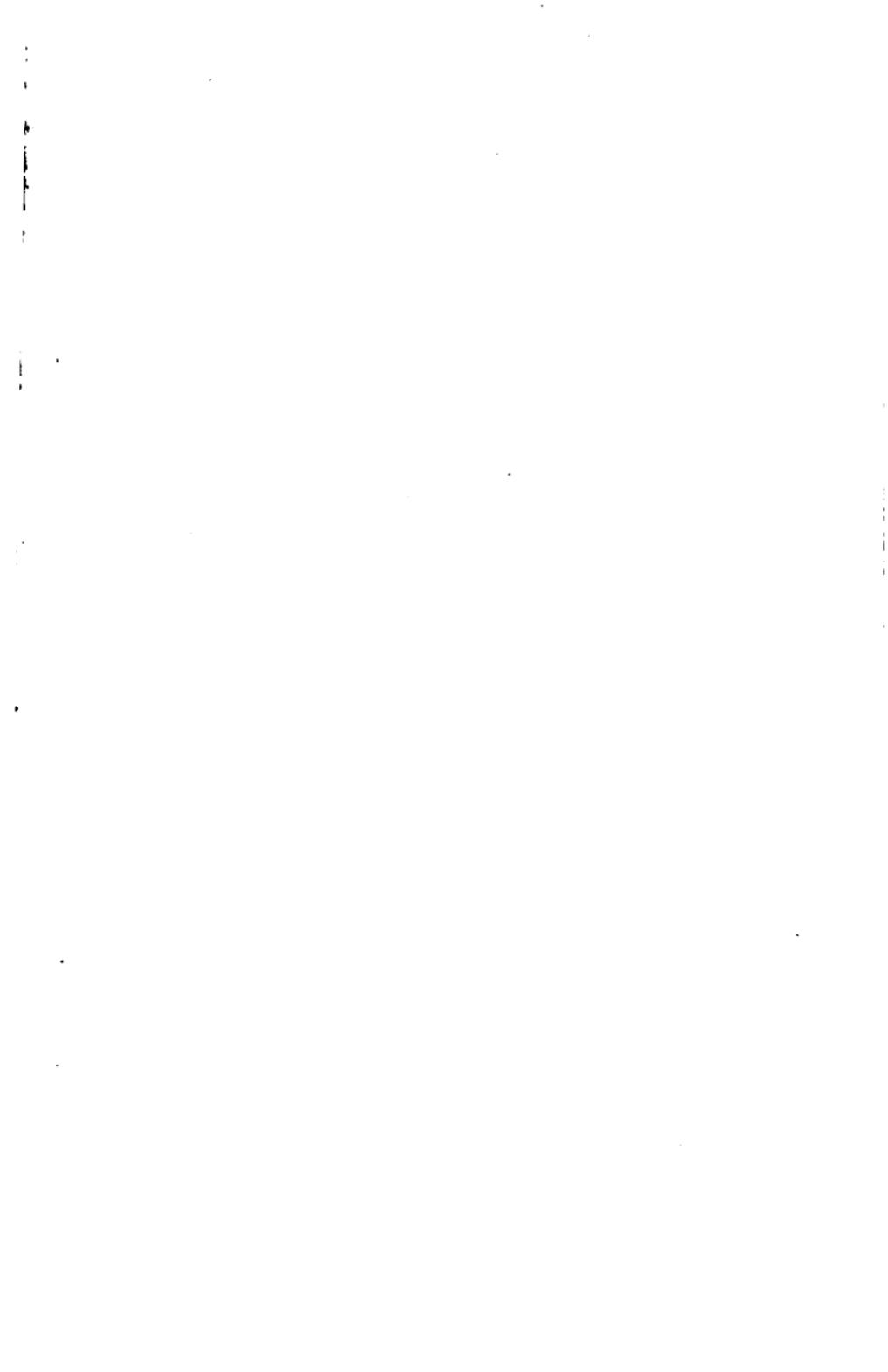


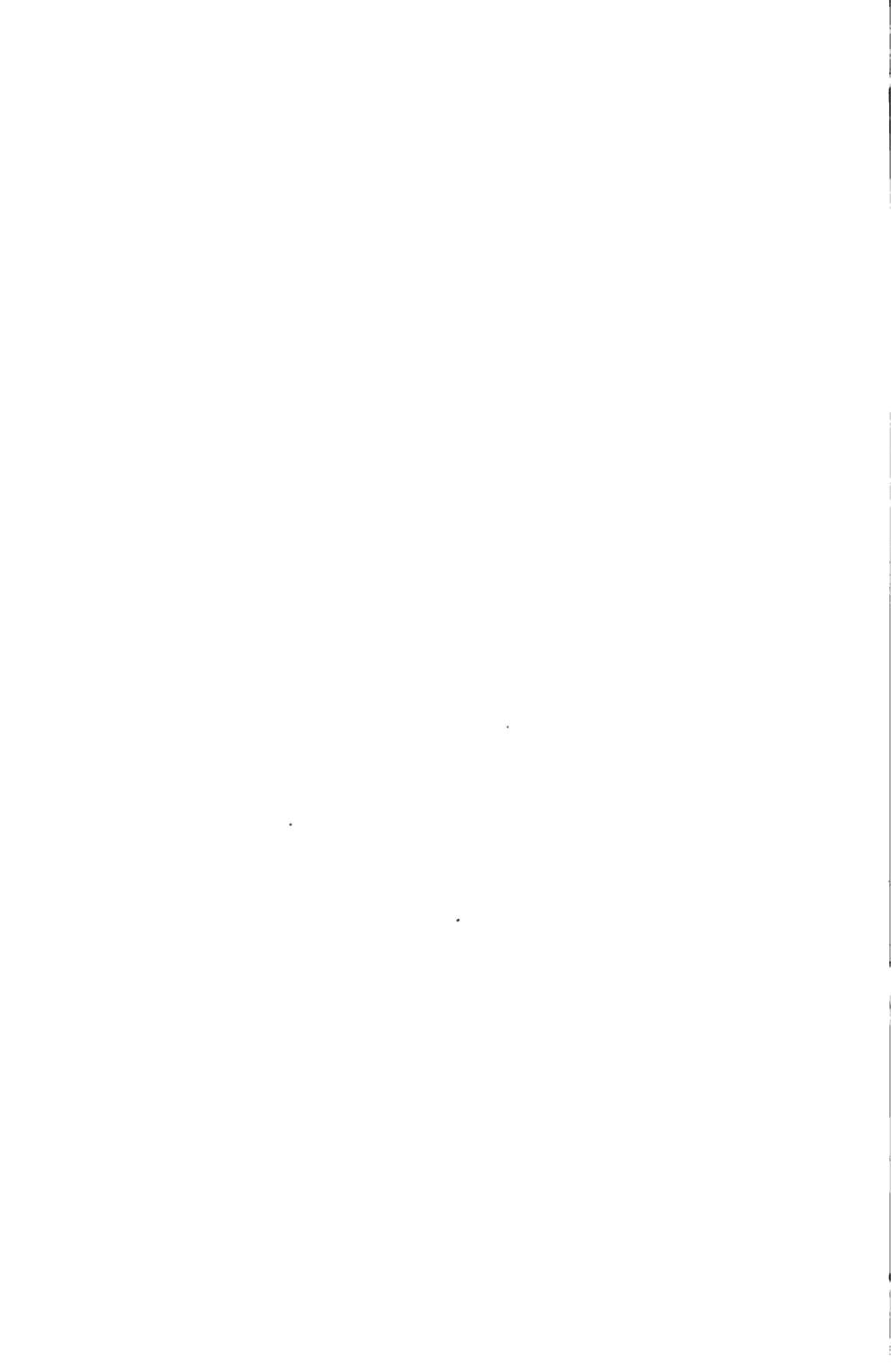
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A Talk About Books.



A TALK ABOUT BOOKS

Addressed originally to the
students of the Central High
School, Buffalo . . . By J. N.
Larned, Editor of "History
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A Talk About Books.

I WAS asked to say something to you about Books; but when I began to collect my thoughts it seemed to me that the subject on which I really wished to speak is not well defined by the word Books.

If you had been invited to listen to a discourse on Baskets, you would naturally ask, "Baskets of what?" The Basket, in itself, would seem to be a topic so insignificant that you might reasonably object to the wasting of time on it. It is a thing which has no worth of its own, but borrows all its useful value from the things which are put into it. It belongs to a large class of what may be called the conjunctive utensils of mankind—the vessels and vehicles which are good for nothing but to hold together and to carry whatever it may be that men need to convey from place to place or from one to another.

Now, Books are utensils of that class quite as distinctly as Baskets are. In themselves, as mere fabrications of paper and ink, they are as worthless as empty wickerware. They differ from one another in value and in interest precisely as a basket of fruit differs from a basket of coals, or a basket of garbage from a basket of flowers, which is the difference of their contents, and that only.

So it is not, in reality, of Books that I wish to speak, but of the contents of Books. It may be well for us to think of Books in that way, as vessels—vehicles—carriers—because it leads us, I am sure, to more clearly classified ideas of them. It puts them all into one category, to begin with, as carriers in the commerce of mind with mind; which instantly suggests that there are divisions of kind in that commerce, very much as there are divisions of kind in the mercantile traffic of the world, and we proceed naturally to some proper assorting of the mind-matter which Books are carriers for. The division we are likely to recognize first is one that separates all which we commonly describe to ourselves

as Knowledge, from everything which mind can exchange with mind that is not Knowledge, in the usual sense, but rather some state of feeling. Then we see very quickly that, while Knowledge is of many kinds, it is divisible as a whole into two great, widely different species, the line between which is an interesting one to notice. One of these species we may call the *Knowledge of what has been*, and the other we will describe as the *Knowledge of what is*. The first is Knowledge of the Past; the second is Knowledge of the Present. The first is History; the second is (using the word in a large sense) Science. We are not straining the term Science if we make it cover everything, in philosophy, politics, economics, arts, that is not historical; and we shall not be straining the term Poetry if we use that to represent everything which we have left out of the category of positive *Knowledge*, being everything that belongs to imagination and emotion.

In History, Science, Poetry, then, we name the most obvious assorting of the matter known as Literature, of which Books

are the necessary carriers. But there is another classification of it, not often considered, which is a more important one, in my view, and which exhibits the function of Books much more impressively. Draw one broad line through everything that mind can receive from mind,—everything,—memory, thought, imagination, suggestion—and put on one side of it all that has come from the Past, against everything, on the other side, that comes from the Present, and then meditate a little on what it signifies! In our first classification we considered the Past only with reference to History, or *Knowledge of the Past*. Now, I wish to put with that all of our Knowledge, of every kind, that has come to us *out of* the Past; and when you have reflected a moment you will see that that means almost everything that we know. For all the Knowledge now in the possession of mankind has been a slow accumulation, going on through not less than forty centuries. Each succeeding generation has learned just a little that was new to add to what it received from the generations before, and has passed the inheritance on

with a trivial increase. We are apt to look rather scornfully at any Science which is dated before 1897. But where would our brand-new discoveries have been without the older ones which led up to them by painful steps? In nine cases out of ten it was an eye of genius that caught the early glimpses of things which dull eyes can see plainly enough now.

Most of the Science, then, which we value so in these days, has come to us, in the train of all History, out of the Past; and Poetry, too, has come with them, and Music, and the great laws of righteousness, without which we could be little better than the beasts. How vast an estate it is that we come into as the intellectual heirs of all the watchers and searchers and thinkers and singers of the generations that are dead! What a heritage of stored wealth! What perishing poverty of mind we should be left in without it!

Now, Books are the carriers of all this accumulating heritage from generation to generation; and that, I am sure you will agree with me, is their most impressive function. It will bear thinking of a little further.

You and I, who live at this moment, stand islanded, so to speak, on a narrow strand between two great time-oceans,—the ocean of Time Past and the ocean of Time to Come. When we turn to one, looking future-ward, we see nothing—not even a ripple on the face of the silent, mysterious deep, which is veiled by an impenetrable mist. We turn backward to the other sea, looking out across the measureless expanse of Time Past, and, lo! it is covered with ships. We see them rise from beyond the far horizon in fleets which swarm upon the scene, and they come sailing to us in numbers that are greater than we can count. They are freighted with the gifts of the dead to us who are the children of the dead. They bring us the story of the forgotten life of mankind, its experience, its learning, its wisdom, its warnings, its counsels, its consolations, its songs, its discoveries of beauty and joy. What if there had been no ships to bring us these? Think of it! What if the great ocean of Time Past rolled as blankly and blackly behind us as the ocean of Time to Come rolls before us? What if there were no

Letters and no Books? For the ships in this picture are those carriers of the commodities of mind which we call Letters and Books.

Think what your state would be in a situation like that! Think what it would be to know nothing, for example, of the way in which American Independence had been won, and the federal republic of the United States constructed; nothing of Bunker Hill; nothing of George Washington; except the little, half true and half mistaken, that your fathers could remember, of what their fathers had repeated, of what *their* fathers had told to them! Think what it would be to have nothing but shadowy traditions of the voyage of Columbus, of the coming of the Mayflower pilgrims, and of all the planting of life in the New World from Old World stocks, like Greek legends of the Argonauts and of the Heraclidæ! Think what it would be to know no more of the origins of the English people, their rise and their growth in greatness, than the Romans knew of their Latin beginnings; and to know no more of Rome herself than we might guess from the ruins she has left!

Think what it would be to have the whole story of Athens and Greece dropped out of our knowledge, and to be unaware that Marathon was ever fought, or that one like Socrates had ever lived! Think what it would be to have no line from Homer, no thought from Plato, no message from Isaiah, no Sermon on the Mount, nor any parable from the lips of Jesus!

Can you imagine a world intellectually famine-smitten like that—a bookless world—and not shrink with horror from the thought of being condemned to it?

Yet,—and here is the grim fact which I am most anxious to impress on your thought,—the men and the women who take nothing from letters and books are choosing to live as though mankind did actually wallow in the awful darkness of that state from which writing and books have rescued us. For them, it is as if no ship had ever come from the far shores of old Time where their ancestry dwelt; and the interest of existence to them is huddled in the petty space of their own few years, between walls of mist which thicken as impenetrably behind them as before. How

can life be worth living on such terms as that? How can man or woman be content with so little, when so much is proffered?

I have dwelt long enough on the generalized view of Books, their function and their value. It is time that I turned to more definite considerations.

You will expect me, no doubt, to say something of the relative value of Books, to indicate some principles in choosing them, and to mark, perhaps, some lines for reading. There must always be a difficulty in that undertaking for any person who would give advice to others concerning Books, though his knowledge of them surpassed mine a hundredfold. For the same book has never the same value for all minds, and scarcely two readers can follow the same course in their reading with the same good. There is a personal bent of mind which ought to have its way in this matter, so far as a deliberate judgment in the mind itself will allow. So far, that is, as one can willingly do it who wisely desires the fullest culture that his mind is capable of receiving, he should humor its



inclinations. Against an eager delight in poetry, for example, he should not force himself, I am sure, to an obstinate reading of science; nor vice versa. But the lover of poetry who neglects science entirely, and the devotee of science who scorns acquaintance with poetry, are equally guilty of a foolish mutilation of themselves. The man of science needs, even for a large apprehension of scientific truth, and still more for a large and healthy development of his own being, that best exercise of imagination which true poetry only can give. The man of poetic nature, on the other hand, needs the discipline of judgment and reason for which exact learning of some kind is indispensable.

So inclination is a guide to follow, in reading as in other pursuits, with extremest caution; and there is one favorite direction in which we can never trust it safely. That is down the smooth way of indolent amusement, where the gardens of weedy romance are, and the fields in which idle gossip is gathered by farmers of news. Of the value of Romance in true literature, and of the intellectual worth of that knowledge of

passing events which is News in the real sense, I may possibly say something before I am done. I touch them now only to remark that the inclination which draws many people so easily into a dissipated reading of trashy novels and puerile news-gossip is something very different from the inclination of mind which carries some to science, some to history, some to poetry. In the latter there is a turn of intellect, a push of special faculties, a leaning of taste, which demand respect, as I have said. The former is nothing more than one kind of the infirmity which produces laziness in all its modes. The state of a novel-steeped mind is just that of a lounging, lolling, slouching body, awake and alive enough for some superficial pleasant tickling of sense-consciousness, but with all energy drained out of it and all the joy of strength in action unknown. It is a loaferish mind that can loll by the hour over trash in novels or trivialities in a newspaper.

To come back to the question of choice among good books: there is a certain high region in all departments of literature which every reader who cares to make the most

of himself and the best of life ought to penetrate and become in some measure acquainted with, whatever his personal leanings may be. It is the region of the *great* books—the greatest, that is, of the greater kinds. For the realm of literature is a vast universe of solar systems—of suns and satellites; and, while no man can hope to explore it all, he may seek and find the central sources of light in it and take an illumination from them which no reflected rays can give. In Poetry (which I must speak of again), I doubt if many people can read very much of minor verse—the verse of merely ingenious fancies and melodious lines—with intellectual benefit, whatever pleasure it may afford them. But the *great* poems, which fuse thought and imagination into one glorified utterance, will carry an enrichment beyond measuring into any mind that has capacity to receive them. I believe that those fortunate young people who are wise enough, or wisely enough directed, to engrave half of Shakespeare upon their memories, lastingly, in their youth, with something of Milton, something of Goethe, something of

Wordsworth, something of Keats, something of Tennyson, something of Browning, something of Dante, something of Homer and the Greek dramatists, with much of Hebrew poetry from the Bible, have made a noble beginning of the fullest and finest culture that is possible. To memorize great poems in early life is to lay a store in the mind for which its happy possessor can never be too thankful in after years. I speak from experience, not of the possession of such a store, but of the want of it. I have felt the want greatly since I came to years when memory will not take deposits graciously, nor keep them with faithfulness, and I warn you that if these riches are to be yours at all you must gather them in your youth.

A great poem is like a mountain top, which invites one toward the heavens, into a new atmosphere, and a new vision of the world, and a new sense of being. There are no other equal heights in literature except those which have been attained by a few teachers of the divinest truth, who have borne messages of righteousness to mankind. Even as literature, to be read for nothing more than their quality and

their influence as such, what can compare with the parables and discourses of Jesus, as reported in the Gospels? I know of nothing else that comes nearer to them than a few of the dialogues of Plato, which exhibit the character and represent the higher teachings of Socrates. The three dialogues called the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phædo*, which tell the sublime story of the trial and death of Socrates, are writings that I would put next to the books of the Evangelists in the library of every young reader. They were separately published a few years ago, in a small, attractive volume, under the title of *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, and they are also to be found in the second volume of the fine translation of Plato made by Professor Jowett. Another selection of half a dozen of the best of the Socratic dialogues can be had in a charming little book entitled *Talks with Athenian Youths*. By the side of these, I would put the *Thoughts* of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the *Enchiridion* of Epictetus; and not far from them I would place the *Essays* of Lord Bacon and of our own wise Emerson.

These are books, not of mere Knowledge, but of Wisdom, which is far above Knowledge. Knowledge is brought *into* the mind ; Wisdom is from its own springs. Knowledge is the fruit of learning ; Wisdom is the fruit of meditation. Knowledge is related to the facts of life, and to man in his dependence on them ; Wisdom is concerned with life itself, and with man in his own being. Knowledge equips us for our duties and tasks ; Wisdom lights them up for us. The great meditative books, such as these I have named, are books that have lifted, exalted, illuminated millions of minds, and their power will never be spent. A book of science grows stale with age, and is superseded by another. The book of wisdom can never grow old. But in this age of science it is apt to be neglected, and therefore I speak with some pleading for it. Do not pass it by in your reading.

In what I say to you, I am thinking of books as we use them in *reading*, not in *study*. Study has some special cultivation of mind or particular acquisition in view ; reading is a more general, discursive, and lighter pursuit of the good that is in books.

Now, it is looking at them in that way, broadly, that I will make a few suggestions about books which belong in what I have classed as the literature of Knowledge. I would award the highest place in that class to History, because it gives more exercise than any other, not alone to every faculty of our intelligence—to our reason, our judgment, our memory, and our imagination—but to every moral sensibility we possess. But if History is to be read with that effect it must not be read as a mere collection of stories of war and battle, revolution and adventure. It must not be traversed as one strolls through a picture gallery, looking at one thing in a frame here, and another thing in a frame there,—an episode depicted by this historian, an epoch by that one, the career of a nation by a third,—each distinct from every other, in its own framing, and considered in itself. To read History in that way is to lose all its meaning and teaching. On the contrary, we must keep always in our minds a view of History as one great whole, and the chief interest we find in it should be that of discovering the connec-

tion and relation of each part to other parts. Of course, we have to pick up our knowledge of it in pieces and sections; but only as fast as we can put them together, and acquire a wide, comprehensive survey of events and movements, in many countries, will historical knowledge become real knowledge to us, and its interest and value be disclosed to our minds. We see then what a seamless web it is, woven as Goethe describes it, in "the roaring loom of time," of unbroken threads which stretch from the beginning of the life of men on the earth, and which will spin onward to the end. We read then the history of our own country as a part of the history of the English people, and the history of the English people as a part of the history of the Germanic race, and Germanic history in its close sequence to Roman history, and Roman history as the outcome of conditions which trace back to Greece and the ancient East. We read the thrilling narrative of our great civil war, not as a tragical story which begins at Sumter and ends at Appomattox, but as the tremendous catastrophe of a long, inflexible series of

effects and causes which runs back from the New World into the Old, and through centuries of time, slowly engendering the conflict which exploded at last in the rebellion of a slave-holding self-interest against the hard-won supremacy of a national conscience.

Concerning History, then, I come back again, with special emphasis, to the counsel I gave generally before: read the *great* books, which spread it for you in large views. Whatever you may seek in the way of minute details and close studies, here and there, for this and that period and country, get a general groundwork for them in your mind from the comprehensive surveys of the great historians. Above all, read Gibbon. If you would comprehend modern History, you *must* read his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It is the one fundamental work. Though it is old, nothing supersedes it. It is an unequalled, unapproached panorama of more than a thousand years of time, crowded with the most pregnant events, on the central stage of human history. Whatever else you read or do not read, you cannot afford to neglect Gibbon.

Of the ages before Gibbon's period, in Roman, Greek, and Oriental history, there is nothing which offers a really large, comprehensive survey. But Maspero, Sayce, McCurdy, Thirlwall, Grote, Curtius, Mahafty, Mommsen, Merivale, are of the best. For a brief, clear account of the Roman Republic, sketching its inner rather than its surface history, I know of nothing else so good as Horton's *History of the Roman People*.

Generally, as regards ancient history, there is a warning which I find to be often needed. Within quite recent years the discoveries that have been made, by digging into buried ruins of old cities, bringing to light and comparing great numbers of records from the remotest times, preserved by their inscription on earthen tablets and on stone, have so added to and so corrected our knowledge of ancient history that the narratives of the older historians have become of little worth. It is an utter waste of time, for example, to read the venerable Rollin, new editions of whose history are still being published and sold. You might as well go to Ptolemy for astronomy, or to Aristotle for physical science. It is a worse

waste of time to read Abbott histories, and their kind. Beware of them.

Mediæval history, too, and many periods more modern, have received new light which discredits more or less the historians who were trusted a generation or two ago. Hallam is found to be wrong in important parts of his view of the institutions of feudalism. Hume is seen to give untrue representations of English political history at some of its chief turning points. Macaulay has done frequent injustice in his powerful arraignment of great actors on the British stage. The study and the writing of history have become more painstaking, more accurate, more dispassionate, less partisan and less eloquent, but more just. We get the surest and broadest views of it in Freeman, Stubbs, Maitland, Green, Gairdner, Gardiner, Ranke, May, Lecky, and Seeley for English history, with Bagehot to describe the present working of the English Constitution.

In continental history, mediæval and modern, I will mention just a few among many of the books which I think can be safely recommended: Church's *Beginnings*

of the *Middle Ages*, Emerton's *Mediæval Europe*, Henderson's *Germany in the Middle Ages*, Bryce's *Holy Roman Empire*, some of Freeman's *Historical Essays*, Milman's *History of Latin Christianity*, Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy*, Trollope's *Commonwealth of Florence*, Ranke's and Creighton's histories of the Papacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Häusser's *Period of the Reformation*, Baird's Huguenot histories, Motley's *Rise of the Dutch Republic* and *United Netherlands*, Gindely or Gardiner's *Thirty Years War*, Perkins's *France under Mazarin*, and *France under the Regency*, Rocquain's *Revolutionary Spirit Preceding the Revolution*, Stephen's *French Revolution*, Sloane's *History of Napoleon*, or Seeley's *Short History*, Thayer's *Dawn of Italian Independence*, Fyffe's *History of Modern Europe*, Andrews's *Historical Development of Modern Europe*, and the series by different writers now in course of publication entitled *Periods of European History*. Moreover, the little books in the series called *Epochs of English History* and *Epochs of Modern History* are almost all of them excellent.

Into American history it is best, for several reasons, that we, of this country, should go more thoroughly than into that of other countries. One who tries to get his knowledge of it from a single book or two will remain very ignorant. The best of the general narratives which attempt to cover the whole, from Columbus, or even from Captain John Smith, to President McKinley, are only sketches that need to be filled. Take from Fiske, as far as he will go with you, the story of *The Discovery of America*, of the *Beginnings of New England*, of the *Revolution*, and of the *Critical Period* which followed it, down to the adoption of the Federal Constitution. If you go over the same ground again in Bancroft you will do well; and you will do still better, for your own delight, if you stay long enough in colonial times to read all that Parkman has written of the French in America and of their great effort to possess the continent. Irving, in his *Life of Washington*, and McMaster, in his *History of the People of the United States*, will give you a good knowledge of the first years of the republic; but you will never understand

Jefferson and Madison, and the rise of the great old political parties, and the War of 1812 with England, if you do not read the history written by Henry Adams, which covers the time between John Adams and Monroe. For the next third of a century, I would trust to Holst's *Constitutional and Political History*, and Professor Burgess's history of *The Middle Period*, as it is named in the *American History Series*. These works are made unnecessarily hard reading by their style, but they are full of good instruction. With them I would place half a dozen of the biographies in the series of the *American Statesmen*, for side lights thrown upon the politics of the time. Then take Rhodes's history from the compromise of 1850, which carries you into the Civil War; and for that great struggle I consider Nicolay and Hay's *Abraham Lincoln* to be, on the whole, the best history that has been written yet. It is a huge work, in many volumes, but no one who reads it will waste time or easily tire. Along with it should be read the collected writings of Abraham Lincoln, which are the most lasting literature, excepting, perhaps, Emerson's *Essays*,

that America has produced. As a whole series of state papers, I believe that the speeches, letters, messages and proclamations of President Lincoln are the most extraordinary, in wisdom, in spirit, and in composition, that ever came, in any country or any age, from the tongue and pen of one man. You will find it an education, both in literature and in politics, to read them again and again. Read, too, the simply and nobly written *Personal Memoirs* of General Grant, with those of Sherman, Sheridan, and Joe Johnston, Long's *Life of Lee*, Blaine's *Twenty Years in Congress*, and your knowledge of rebellion history will be quite complete. Then cap your reading in this region of history and politics with Bryce's *American Commonwealth*, and I would have no great desire to urge more.

Biography is in one sense a part of History; but that which interests us in it most, and from which we take the most good, if we take any, is more than historical. The story of a life which offers nothing but its incidents, informs us of nothing but its achievements, was never worth the telling.

Fill it with romance, or glorify it with great triumphs, and still there is small worth in it. If he who lived the life is not in himself more interesting and more significant to us than all the circumstance of his life, then the circumstance is vainly set forth. What Biography at its best can give us, as the finest form of History, and as more than History, is the personal revelation, the in-seen portraiture of here and there a human soul which is not common in its quality. The exemplars that it sets most abundantly before us, of a vulgar kind of practical success in the world—the success of a mere self-seeking talent and industry applied to private business or to public affairs—are well enough in their way, and may make some small impressions of good effect on some minds; but we take no inspiration from them—they give us no ideals. What we ought to seek everywhere in books is escape from the commonplace—the commonplace in thought and the commonplace in character with which our daily life surrounds us. Our chief dependence is on books to bring us into intercourse with the

picked, choice examples of human kind; to show us what they *are* or what they have *been*, as well as what they have thought,—what they have done, as well as what they have said,—with what motives, from what impulses, with what powers, to what ends, in what spirit, the work of their lives has been done. When Biography does that for us it is one of the most precious forms of literature. But when it only crams our library shelves with "process-print" pictures, so to speak, of commonplace characters in commonplace settings of life, we waste time in reading it. I know people who relish Biography as they would relish gossip in talk, delighting in disclosures from other men's and other women's lives, no matter how trivial, and all the more, perhaps, when some spicing of scandal is in them. So far as it invites reading in that spirit there is nothing to commend it. But I have never known one who enjoyed what may be called the fine flavors of character in biography who had not fine tastes in all literature.

The composition of Biography would seem to be one of the most difficult of

literary arts, since masterpieces in it are so few. The delightful and the noble subjects that have been offered to it in every age of the world are abounding in number, but how many have been worthily treated? One can almost count on his fingers the biographical works that hold a classic place in common esteem. Generally, of the best and greatest and most beautiful lives that have been lived there is no story which communicates the grandeur or the charm as we ought to be made to feel it.

The most famous of biographies, that of Doctor Samuel Johnson by his admiring friend Boswell, has a strong and striking personality for its subject; but who can read it without wishing that some figure more impressive in human history stood where a strange fortune has put the sturdy old Tory, in the wonderful light that reveals him so immortally? Among literary men, Sir Walter Scott has come nearer, perhaps, than any other to Doctor Johnson's good fortune, in the life of him written by Lockhart, his son-in-law. Trevelyan's *Life and Letters of Macaulay*, and the *Memoirs of Charles Kingsley* by his wife, are probably

the best of later examples in literary biography. But in a certain view all the more eminent *Men of Letters*, English and American, may be called biographically fortunate since the publication in England and America of the two series of small biographies so named. It is true that these are rather to be looked upon as critical studies and sketches than as biographies in the adequate sense; but most of them are remarkably good in their way, and for these busy days of many books they may suffice. The same is true of the *Twelve English Statesmen* series in political biography, as well as of the series of *American Statesmen*, alluded to before.

Using the term "study" in the sense in which artists use it, when, for example, they distinguish between a portrait and a "study of a head," I should apply it to a large class of biographical sketches which are as true to literary art as the most finished biography could be, and only lack its completeness in detail. The prototype of all such writings is found in *Plutarch's Lives*, which are studies — comparative studies — of the great characters of antiquity, and

models to this day of their kind. As we have them in Dryden's translation revised by Clough, or in the old translation by North which Shakespeare used, there is no better reading for old or for young.

Scientific biography is at its best, I should say, in the *Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, by his son. But the story of the *Life of Thomas Edward*, the humble Scotch naturalist, as told by Doctor Samuel Smiles, is hardly to be surpassed as a book of edification and delight, especially for the young. Smiles's *Life of Robert Dick* is nearly but not quite as good; and the *Autobiography of James Nasmyth*, man of science and great engineer, edited by the same skillful hand, is one of the books which I never lose an opportunity to press upon boys, for the sake of the wonderful example it sets before them of a thoughtful plan of life perseveringly carried out, from beginning to end. Other works of Smiles in industrial biography—lives of Watts, the Stephensons, and many more—are all exceptionally interesting and wholesome to read.

Franklin's autobiography, in the same line of interest and influence, is one of the

books which the world would be greatly poorer without. Grimm's *Life of Michael Angelo* takes a kindred lesson of life and lifts it to a setting more heroic. Goethe's autobiography, and his *Conversations with Eckermann*, are of the books that stamp themselves ineffaceably on a receptive mind and that ought to be read before the enthusiasms of youth are outworn.

But I am particularizing books much more than it was my intention to do. I had planned a hasty excursion along the watersheds of literature, so to speak, just to notice some features of the geography of the world of books, and point here and there to a monument that seemed important in my view. To assume to be really a guide for any other reading than my own is more than I am willing to undertake.

Into the region of Science I shall not venture at all, nor into any of the provinces of the Arts.

For a moment, before I close, let me go back to speak of Romance and the reading

of it, as I promised to do. "Light literature" is the term we are accustomed to hear applied, without much discrimination, to the whole class in which it belongs. I do not like the term, if it is used disparagingly and for all Romance. The literature that is weighted with the fruits of the genius of Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Scott, Hawthorne, DeFoe, cannot justly be called "light." The lightness which it has is the lightness of the spirit of Art,—the lightness which Art takes from the wings on which it is exalted, and whereby it has the power to transport us high and far, and make us travelers beyond the swimming of ships or the rolling of wheels. The modern Romance, or novel, is the heir and successor of the Epic and the Drama, and holds the important place in literature which they held in former times. If Shakespeare were living in these days, I do not doubt that we should have more novels from his pen than plays. As a true product of art in literature, the novel seems to me to be a great instrument of education, in the large sense of the word—not for all men and women, perhaps, but

for most, and especially for those whose lives are narrow and constrained. There are not many of us who do not owe to it some reaches and happy vistas of the intellectual landscape in which we live, and the compass of our thoughts, feelings, sympathies, tolerances, would shrink sadly if they were taken away. It is only a little region of actual things that we can include in our personal horizons—a few people, a few communities, a few groups and growths of society, a few places, a few situations and arrangements of circumstance, a few movements of events, that we can know and be familiar with by any intimacy and experience of our own. But how easily our neighborhoods and acquaintances are multiplied for us by the hospitable genius of the novelist! To be put in companionship with Caleb Garth and Adam Bede and Doctor Maclure; with Colonel Newcombe and Henry Esmond; to meet Mrs. Poyser and Mr. Weller; to visit in Barsetshire with Mr. Trollope, and loiter through Alsace with the Messrs. Erckmann and Chatrian; to look on Saxon England with the imagination of Kingsley, on eighteenth-

century England with the sympathetic understanding of Thackeray, on Puritan Massachusetts with the clairvoyance of Hawthorne,—how large and many sided a life would have to be to embrace in its actualities so much of a ripening education as that!

There is no reading more wholesome, within temperate bounds, than the novel, if we choose that which is pure art from that which is spurious and base. The danger of the reading is in the lure of the pleasurable excitement which it affords, and which is apt to tempt us too far, to the neglect of other books. But it is the lure which we have to resist in all pleasure, and we can make no greater mistake than we do if we condemn pleasure because of its allurements. The refinements of life come chiefly from its pleasures. That is true to an extent which is sure to surprise us when we think of it first. Unfortunately, it is no less true that the meaner influences which vitiate and vulgarize life, making it gross and coarse, come from the pleasure side of existence too. There the main sources of the two are together; on one hand, the

springs of all art—music, poetry, romance, drama, sculpture, painting—brimmed with delights of the imagination and the joy of the beauty of the world; on the other hand, the muddy wells into which so many people choose perversely to dip. These contrary influences are working in every region of pleasurable art, but nowhere else so actively as in the field of letters, and we encounter them at every turn when we go among books seeking mainly to be entertained. Especially they divide the flood of fiction into two streams, one of which is distinguished from the other by a thousand impure stains. On which of the two currents an offered book of entertainment is floated to us is what we must know, if we can. Whether it is brilliant or commonplace, alive with genius or dead with the lack, are not the first questions to be asked. The prior question, as I conceive, is this: *Does the book leave any kind of fine and wholesome feeling in the mind of one who reads it?* That is not a question concerning the mere morality of the book, in the conventional meaning of the term. It touches the whole quality of the work as

one of true literature. *Does it leave any kind of fine and wholesome feeling in the mind of one who reads it?* There is no mistaking a feeling of that nature, though it may never seem twice the same in our experience of it. Sometimes it may be to us as though we had eaten of good food; at other times like the exhilaration of wine; at others, again, like a draught of water from a cool spring. Some books that we read will make us feel that we are lifted as on wings; some will make music within us; some will just fill us with a happy content. In such feelings there is a refining potency that is equaled in nothing else. The simplest art is as sure to produce them as the highest. We take them from Burns's *Lines to a Mouse*, from Wordsworth's *Poor Susan*, from the story of *Ruth*, from the story of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, from the story of *Picciola*, from the story of *Daddy Darwin's Dovecot*, as certainly as from *Hamlet* or from *Henry Esmond*. The true pleasure, the fine pleasure, the civilizing pleasure, to be drawn from any form of art is one which leaves a distinctly wholesome feeling of some such nature as these



which I have tried to describe; and the poem, the romance, the play, the music, or the picture which has nothing of the sort to give us, but only a moment of sensation and then blankness, does no kind of good, however innocent of positive evil it may be.

If the wholesome feeling which all true art produces, in literature or elsewhere, is unmistakable, so, too, are those feelings of the other nature which works of an opposite character give rise to. Our minds are as sensitive to a moral force of gravitation as our bodies are sensitive to the physical force, and we are as conscious of the downward pull upon us of a vulgar tale or a vicious play as we are conscious of the buoyant lift of one that is nobly written. We have, likewise, a mental touch, to which the texture of coarse literature is as distinct a fact as the grit in a muddy road that we grind with our heels. And so I will say again, that the conclusive test for a book which offers pleasure rather than knowledge is in the question, *Does it leave any kind of wholesome and fine feeling in the mind of one who reads it?*





